Conference organiser's handbook Documentation

Release 0.2

Daniele Procida

Feb 20, 2018

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The main purpose of this document is to help you avoid being remembered as *that idiot who tried to organise a conference*.

How to use the handbook

The Handbook is organised around the *Timeline* - the milestone items that you will need to do in the run-up to the event. It also discusses some of the practicalities that you need to have set up or in place to plan and execute the event successfully - most of these are also linked to from the timeline, as well as being listed separately in the contents.

1.1 Make your plans

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About the handbook

The handbook was created by Daniele Procida, Community and Documentation Manager at Divio AG of Zürich. It's based on the experiences of organising and attending numerous international Python/Django events.

It's aimed particularly at organisers of Python/Django community events, and reflects the traditions and values of PyCons and DjangoCons.

2.1 Timeline

2.1.1 How to use the timeline

The timeline counts down to the first day of your event. It gives you visual indication of your progress. You may find it useful to have your own, editable copy, with actual dates in it.

The timeline is a guide. You will need to adapt it to your own needs. For example if you have decided to hold an event in six months' time, you'll need to compress the timeline substantially.

For each date in the timeline, don't forget to move any item that can't be checked off forward to the next day or week.

2.1.2 Twenty-four to eighteen months

Form a *committee of organisers*, and make your basic plans. You need to decide on:

- *Location*
- *Venues*
- ideal *Dates*
- proposed *schedule*

2.1.3 Eighteen to twelve months

Depending on local legislation, you may need to form a registered organisation, register for VAT/IVA/sales tax, etc.

Turn your back-of-the-envelope budget calculations into something more carefully worked out.

Agree on dates and prices with the venues.

2.1.4 Twelve months

Agree on special conference pricing with some hotels. Get agreements about the number of rooms that will be reserved for your attendees.

Start collecting names and contact details of potential sponsors.

2.1.5 Eleven months

Buy *Insurance*.

Start working on the things you'll need to have made decisions on before you go public:

- precise *Schedule*
- sponsorship pricing structure
- graphic design and artwork

2.1.6 Nine months

Get quotes for *audio-visual services and filming, editing and publishing of the sessions*.

2.1.7 Eight months

Accessibility

If you're planning to offer a crèche, or *speech-to-text transcription*, start discussing this with *Things you will need to arrange* providers.

2.1.8 Seven months

Go public. It's a good idea to use an appropriate established domain (`djangocon.eu`, for example) for website and email, Twitter account, and so on.

Once you have a basic *Website* ready (a single page is enough at this stage, with information about the location and the dates), post messages on email lists, the Django weblog, Twitter etc. It's worth mentioning that the conference will be governed by a *Code of Conduct*, even if at this stage mentioning it is all you do.

You need to start collecting sponsors. Some sponsors can be relied upon to sponsor every DjangoCon almost without questions, but they are few. Most will need to know full details of sponsorship terms and benefits.

You'll need a proper sponsorship prospectus. It's best to have it available both as a web page and as PDF.

Start contacting potential sponsors.

Make sure your venues have firm bookings for you. Start discussing *catering arrangements* with the venues.

Make sure that your arrangements with hotels are firmly in place.

Ask the DSF to establish a fund for financial assistance. Work out how many free tickets you can afford to offer.

Programme

Think about:

- keynote talk slots (how many, potential speakers, how long)
- timetables
- length of available talk slots
- tracks
- workshops
- sprints

Your programme of talks is a going to be at the heart of all this. Most other things are flexible and to some extent movable; the talks programme is much less so.

2.1.9 Six months

Publish a timeline of milestones on the website.

Open the call for proposals. If you haven't already chosen or invited keynote speakers, consider submitted proposals for this too.

Open ticket sales - the point of no return.

Open the applications process for financial assistance.

Start announcing, and keep looking for, sponsors.

2.1.10 Five months

Branding, graphics and imagery

Start working in earnest on:

- banners
- t-shirt designs
- stickers

Services

Select your providers of:

- crèche
- AV services
- filming
- additional network services

and make your agreements.

2.1.11 Four months

Have *all* branding, graphics and imagery ready and finalised.

Catering

Discuss arrangements, including menus, in detail, with your caterers.

2.1.12 Three months

Stop accepting talk proposals and grant applications; start assessing them.

Start replying to the best proposals immediately. Make it clear that a proposal can only be accepted once the speaker has purchased a ticket (or has submitted a grant application).

Liaise with the grants committee to ensure that they know of any applicants you'd like to have as speakers. Make sure the grants committee understands your deadlines and the importance of making its decisions and informing people in a timeframe that works for the conference.

Visit the venues with service providers; even if you don't, keep contact with them open.

Start compiling your conference programme booklet.

If you want to have music during breaks, start preparing your compilations.

2.1.13 Two months

Everyone should have been informed of the decisions of the proposals and grants committees; all speakers should have tickets.

Check again with service providers.

Publish your programme in full, or as full as possible, with a full timetable of talks, breaks, meals and so on.

Get quotes for printing expected quantities of:

- t-shirts
- programme booklets
- signage
- badges
- lanyards

Visit the venue to find out exactly where the sponsors will have their tables, and ensure that there's going to be enough room for them all. Start compiling a plan for the layout of sponsors' tables.

Contact all your sponsors to remind them that they need to provide you with:

- artwork for the booklet
- any gifts they want included in the attendee pack

Let them know what size tables they will be provided with, what kind of banners they should bring, and so on.

Your programme booklet should be essentially complete, even if there are numerous sections that are still subject to change. Send it to your printers to ensure that you both understand each other's requirements.

Similarly, send your proposed artwork to t-shirt, sign and other printers.

Start finding volunteers for the event.

2.1.14 One month

Your programme should be more or less finalised. You should be in a position to provide final numbers - or very nearly final numbers - for catering etc to your providers.

Keep updating the booklet.

Contact all your speakers to ensure that they know what to expect - what equipment they need to bring/interface with, what format the data projectors use.

Order your:

- t-shirts
- signage
- badges
- lanyards

Make sure you know when your printing deadline is. Usually one week is enough - but don't assume anything.

Prepare a handbook for volunteers and session chairs.

2.1.15 Two weeks

Get other people to proofread the booklet.

Check again that all service providers are ready and have all the information, deposits and so on that they require.

Contact volunteers inviting them to attend a meeting.

2.1.16 One week

Confirm final numbers to the catering, crèche and other providers.

Meeting with volunteers.

Registration rehearsal - if possible, do this in the space and with the equipment where you'll be doing it on the day.

2.1.17 One day

Bag packing with volunteers.

Open early registration - attendees at DjangoCons and PyCons love helping, and will probably be turning up to find out if they can help. Take the opportunity to register as many as you can; each one will be someone you don't need to register tomorrow.

Try to get a good night's sleep; you'll be up early in the morning.

2.2 Plan your event

Various things will determine the fundamental shape and character of your event, including its scale, duration and ethos.

You need to have a very strong idea of all of these from the start - they are what your conference will be, and they need to be commnicated clearly otherwise potential attendees and sponsors won't understand what it is that they're being asked to commit to.

What is the focus of your event? What is it actually about? Why are you holding it and what do you want attendees to get out of it?

An established event will largely have these questions settled, by remit and tradition. If you're organising a DjangoCon, you'll know what's expected for example. If you're holding a new event, you'll need to make some decisions.

2.2.1 Location

Where in the world will your conference be?

A city with good transport connections to the rest of the world is a safe choice, but your choice doesn't have to be limited to cities.

With the right planning, an event in a holiday resort or the countryside can work equally well (several editions of PyCon Poland have done this).

Questions to ask

Wherever it is, ask yourself some questions:

- Does cost of living there mean the conference is generally affordable?
- How will people travel there?
- How affordable will travel be?
- Is there suitable *Accommodation* available locally?
- Is it a safe, friendly place for visitors?

2.2.2 Venues

Choosing your venue

Size

Your venue needs to be able to accommodate attendees for talks, have room for their lunches and refreshments, space for sponsors' tables and stands, and also some additional space for registration, quiet rooms, a crèche or anything else you're planning.

Location

Choose a place that's reasonably easy for people, especially people who may be unfamiliar with the local area or language, to get to from their accommodation.

Pricing

Get quotes as early as you can. When asking for quotes, be as detailed as possible so that you don't run into unpleasant surprises later. Don't assume that things you need will be included - even basics like tables and chairs can sometimes come at extra cost.

The staff

You're going to be working with the people at the venue, and will need their assistance. You'll generally find that they are accommodating and helpful, but ascertain that as soon as you can.

Use your first meetings to ask everything you can think of; ask them to explain the most basic things, and to see as much as possible. If you get a sense that their patience is running out, you might want to reconsider working with them, because it will be painful and stressful later on when you need to rely upon their help and co-operation.

Accessibility

Does the venue have good access for people who use wheelchairs or have mobility issues? Ask about lifts, ramps and disabled toilets. Is there step-free access between different rooms, for talks, lunch, breaks and so on?

Facilities and services

See *Catering* and *Other important services*

Venues for different purposes

For your programme of talks, you need a venue that can work to a tight and demanding schedule. For sprints, workshops and other events, everything is more relaxed, and you can consider other venues too.

Universities

For sprints and workshops, a local university makes an ideal venue. This is especially the case if you're not charging for those sessions, which typically makes it easy for a committee member involved with a university to book rooms, obtain suitable network/AV support, get official support for the event and so on.

Typically, universities are only too pleased to have collaborative coding events and educational sessions taking place on their premises, and are keen to be involved.

A university will also be likely to have a cafeteria or dining hall well-equipped to feed dozens or hundreds of people.

During university vacations, it's even easier to find suitable rooms and halls for your purposes. You could even find that the university is able to provide inexpensive accommodation in its halls of residence during vacations.

What if your venue becomes unexpectedly unavailable?

Venues can be rendered unavailable without warning by any kind of unexpected event. This **has** happened.

You should have *Insurance* to cover you financially in the event of a disaster, but you should also need to look into the possibility of having a backup venue.

Consider the possibility, so that you know what you would do if the worst were to happen.

2.2.3 Dates

Check that your proposed dates are not likely to be adversely affected by significant events such as:

- public or religious holidays
- elections
- major sporting eventing or cultural events

It can be harder than you think to find a suitable window, especially for a larger event in a smaller city.

Don't forget that your attendees may need a day either side of the event if they are travelling long distances.

2.2.4 Schedule

A typical conference format is to have **talks** followed by **sprints** and **workshops**, for example three days of talks followed by two days of sprints and workshops. This works well and is a tried and tested format.

However there are many options available, including:

- starting with a day of introductory sessions to help people get up to speed
- holding a separate day of paid-for workshops
- holding an open (i.e. open to the public) day to draw in a wider audience1
- running workshops alongside talks in a multi-track event

It's up to you what sort of schedule you adopt, and what sort of emphasis you place on the various parts of it.

Talks

Most people regard the days of talks as being the part of the conference that matters most. It's the part that is most heavily-attended, and the part that requires the most planning.

Sprints

One of the challenges of a conference is getting a good number of attendees at the sprints. Usually, the number who stay on for the sprints drops to around a third or a fifth of the "main" conference attendance.

Ways of raising this number include:

- offering workshops and clinics alongside the sprints
- providing food and refreshment at no extra cost
- ensuring that other services (such as volunteer assistance, or a crèche) continue to be provided during the sprints
- holding a social event on one of the sprint evenings

Paid-for workshops

Typically these are held at the start of the conference, and can be a useful way of generating a little extra funds for the event.

The fact that the workshops are paid-for can actually stand in their favour, especially when employers are paying for someone to attend - it's sometimes a language that they find easier to understand.

Open day

An open day provides a lower bar to entry, and gives people a chance to experience something of a conference at no cost - and if they like it, they might be back next year.

As well as an introduction to the community, your open day is also an opportunity to offer introductory technical sessions (talks and workshops) that will help draw in people from outside the field, or beginners in the field.

If your open day is held first, its introductory sessions can serve a third purpose, by helping less experience attendees gain some valuable technical knowledge or skills in advance of the main body of talks that will follow.

An open day gives you a chance to provide an extra platform for speakers or space for talks. For example, some first-time speakers will prefer to face a more general audience rather than one of perceived experts, while some talks may simply be more suited to this audience.

Finally, an open day helps you spread your registration out over an extra day, and can take pressure off you and your volunteers.

2.2.5 Social events

You don't *need* to organise social events; the community will organise itself and most people will have a great time. All the same, a conference dinner (preferably on the first night) helps people establish new connections and friendships and is especially valuable for newcomers who have arrived on their own.

You don't have to go to too much trouble: simply suggesting a gathering place for food or drinks helps, and if you can organise something, so much the better.

Another option is to contact a few favourite local restaurants, and ask them to provide a fixed-price meal; you can sell tickets for this meal along with with the conference tickets, and settle up with the restaurants later. This arrangement makes life easy for the restauranteurs, and gives your attendees an easy recommended option for a dinner or two.

You can also use social events to help encourage people towards certain parts of your schedule. Typically, nothing is planned for the evenings of the sprints, but announcing that your big conference party will be held on an evening after a day's sprint will make it clear that the sprints are being treated as an integral part of the event, not an add-on.

If you can afford it, taking your speakers, volunteers and sponsors to dinner is a nice way to say thank-you.

Alcohol

Be aware that:

- many people - probably more than you realise if you do drink yourself - don't drink alcohol
- alcoholic drinks are more expensive than other drinks
- alcohol can fuel unwanted behaviour

It's fair to ensure that your non-drinking attendees are also catered for.

If you're going to provide alcohol at social events or meals, it means that the non-drinkers are paying for the drinkers' pleasure. This doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't do it, as there will be numerous aspects of the event that some people are "paying for" but won't benefit from, and that's simply unavoidable.

It's strongly advisable not to furnish attendees with excessive quantities of free alcohol. The combination of drink and high spirits can easily take a wrong direction. Many complaints of inappropriate behaviour at events are actually about what happens at conference parties.

Code of conduct

Ensure that it's made very clear that the *conference code of conduct* not only applies to all social events, but even to informal and unofficial gatherings of people attending the conference.

Being a good host

You - the committee - are the hosts, wherever your meal or part is being held. You should be the first to arrive and the last to sit down to eat or have a drink (this applies at social events - if you need to jump the lunch queue because you have to get back to your duties, that's perfectly allright).

If possible, you should know who your attendees with special dietary requirements are, so that you can check whether they have received the appropriate food.

It's also your responsibility to help make sure that no-one is sitting on their own, or left out at a meal or party.

You can't be responsible for everything and everybody, but you can, as a committee, look after your guests.

2.3 Organise yourselves

2.3.1 Committee

The conference committee is the team that runs the event. Without a good team, there won't be an event.

Warning: You can't do this alone. It will be damaging for you, and extremely risky for the event.

You need to find ways to build collaboration into the working process early on. If you're not good at that - for example if your natural inclination is to find it easier to do everything yourself - you need to start learning how to do it.

Committee roles

Why defined roles are important

You should establish clear roles and responsibilities as soon as possible.

These roles aren't just unnecessary structure, they are needed because they help people get involved and work with you and each other; they tell people what they are getting into and what needs to be done.

If people don't know what is expected of them and what they are supposed to be doing, they often won't do it.

Having named, defined roles allows people to understand the scale and scope of the various tasks that need to be undertaken, and allows them to have confidence to act and do things.

The sooner you can do this the better.

Suggested roles

Your committe should have a formal:

- Chair - the person leading the event
- Treasurer - to handle money: banking, invoicing, payments

- Secretary - to maintain an official record of meetings, and note who has agreed to do what

There are also other roles that need to be allocated; one person can take on more than one of these, and people can be jointly responsible:

- *Communications* - publicity, news

- Designer - print and web, posters, banners, t-shirts, badges

- Webmaster - web content and updates

- Sponsorship

2.3.2 Volunteers

Note: Although your committee members will be volunteers too, the volunteers in this section are the helpers who get involved in the running of the event, rather than the team that has organised it.

Volunteers are one of the pleasures of running a conference.

People want to volunteer and help - it's their conference and they want to be a part of it. Don't underestimate the number of people who'll be willing to help, or how hard they'll work or effective they will be.

Your committee has to stay small, but your volunteers can be a larger and looser group.

Enlisting volunteers

Just ask for volunteers if you want them, but you'll also find that volunteers approach you asking if they can help.

Student attendees often make excellent volunteers, so especially if your event has some connection with a university, you're likely to find some very good recruits amongst them.

Roles for volunteers

You'll need volunteers:

- while setting up

- at registration

- on the registration desk during the event

- to act as runners

- while clearing up

None of this work is in the least bit glamorous, but you'll be surprised how willing people are to take part in it. Obviously, if you just stand around issuing commands at people their willingness may falter, but in any case you should take a lead by being the first to step in for the worst jobs.

Information

Volunteers need to know what they should do and where they should be; the clearer you can be about this, the better. It should be in written forms, so that don't have to remember important things when they are in a rush. A handbook for volunteers can be valuable.

This should contain:

- information about what happends where and when and who's involved in it
- times and places of all events, including social events
- contact information for all the committee
- a reminder of the code of conduct, and guidance on what to do if there's an issue (see below)

Code of conduct

If there are any code-of-conduct-related problems, volunteers need to know what to do. This should be:

- look after anyone if they are upset
- gather some basic information such as names
- contact the committee

And that's pretty much it. They should not be expected to investigate or resolve anything. Again, this should be provided in written form.

2.3.3 Write it down

> **Warning: You cannot rely on your memory, however good it is.**
>
> The successful planning and execution of a conference requires great attention to detail.
>
> You will have so many things to remember, many of which need to be delivered at precisely the correct moment without a second chance if you forget the first time, that some of them **will** get forgotten - unless you have something more reliable than memory to work with.

You need to find a way first, to capture everything that needs to be captured, and second, to put it in a place where it will come to hand in when you need it.

Capturing the things that come to mind

Get into the habit of writing everything down as soon as it comes to mind.

Everything needs to be recorded somewhere other than the inside of your own head.

There are two reasons for this: firstly, no-one else can can see inside your head, and nearly every part of the organisation and planning needs to be accessible to the other conference organisers. Secondly, even for your own purposes the inside of your head isn't a safe place - you will forget things that aren't written down.

Every time you think of something, dump it as quickly as possible into external storage, whether it's on paper or in an electronic form, or even as a voice memo to yourself. Find a way to do this with the minimum possible friction.

Don't worry about structuring it or getting it down in its final form, because you can take a minute or so each day to move items into the appropriate files when you're not rushing about doing something else.

Ensuring that everything will be at hand

As long as everything has been recorded, you can later move each item where it belongs.

Items for the programme booklet can be dumped into the appropriate file, things you want to mention in your introductions can be dropped into your slides or their notes, things to do can go into your to-do list and so on.

When you're on stage at the end of the event thanking people, that is not when you want to be racking your memory to ensure that you don't forget to thank someone important. You want that to be able to go on stage and know that if someone needs to be thanked, your slides, or the notes that you know you'll have in your hand, will prompt you.

2.4 Things you will need to arrange

Your event will need things like catering, Internet provision and audio-visual services. Your attendees will need accommodation.

2.4.1 Catering

Catering for 300+ people is a serious undertaking. If you get these arrangements wrong, a lot of people are going to be very dissatisfied. This is why you need to establish good relationships with the people who work at your venues early on, so that they can help and advise you.

During the course of a conference day you should provide:

- refreshments on arrival (anything from drinks and biscuits to a cooked breakfast - let your attendees know what you'll be providing, so they can decide whether or they need to have breakfast before they arrive)
- tea/coffee/cakes mid-morning
- lunch (and perhaps tea/coffee after it)
- tea/coffee/cakes mid-afternoon

These are not always provided during sprints, but it's a good idea to do it if you can, as it encourages participation.

You may, depending on your budget and venues, also be able to provide a conference dinner as part of the event and/or a contributors' dinner (for speakers, volunteers and sponsors).

Catering is most likely to be the greatest single cost of running your event - between 55% and 75% of your total expenses.

Food waste

Some caterers have a very lax attitude to food waste. At the end of a lunch at some events you will see shocking quantities of expensive food being thrown away. Not only are you paying for this food to be thrown away, it's a disgusting waste and you should not allow it to be a feature of your conference.

You need to make it clear with your caterers that you do not want food to be prepared unnecessarily, and you are not under any obligation to your attendees to provide huge mountains of food or protect them from the shocking sight of empty food trays.

Your part in this is to ensure that your caterers know exactly how many people to expect at each meal. This means requiring your attendees to give you that information when they register; the simplest way to do that is to require answers on the registration form to the question: *which of the following meals will you require?*.

Dietary requirements

There are few things more miserable than going without food because you can't eat anything that has been provided and no-one thought to ensure that there'd be something for you.

For religious, medical or other reasons some people can't eat certain things. If you're taking people to a restaurant or feeding them, you need to know how many special dietary requirements need to be catered for, and to supply the caterers with that information *in advance*.

It will often be the case that what people with special dietary requirements most need is *information* about the food being served. If someone has a kosher or halal diet for example, then simply labelling the food adequately will be enough for them to make suitable choices.

You need good communication with your caterers; they need information from you, and you need them to ensure that food is appropriately labelled (for allergies, vegetarians, etc), and if people need to ask for specially-prepared meals, it needs to be clear that they have to ask and whom to ask.

It will help your attendees, and save you time because then people won't need to ask you, if you're able to provide good information about food, in advance, to attendees.

2.4.2 Other important services

Internet access

Everyone at a software conference expects to be provided with wireless Internet access. This doesn't necessarily mean they should have it. In fact, there's a strong case that people listening to talks don't *shouldn't* be using the Internet at the same time, but should be paying attention, and there's no reason why you shouldn't point this out and discourage Internet use in the auditorium.

All the same, some people do *need* access, perhaps because:

- they are doing live demos in their talks
- they are writing up and publishing reports of each talk (see the magnificent work of Reinout van Rees or Hamish Downer for examples of this valuable public service)
- they have work to do

Capacity

Don't just accept assurances that your venues' network capacity will be up to the job. The problem with access - and there is almost *always* a problem, somewhere - is rarely one of bandwidth, but one of connectivity to the wireless network.

You may have 350 attendees, but that doesn't mean 350 devices - most people will have a laptop and a phone, and others may even have three or more devices. 350 attendees could quite easily be nearly a thousand devices on the network at once.

Make sure the network providers understand this. Have a direct mobile telephone number of one or preferably two people whom you can call on if you run into serious problems. Have a plan for backup or alternative network provision.

Speech-to-text reporting

Speech-to-text reporting - live transcription of speech to text - is currently not often used at software conferences, but that is changing. The value it brings is immense.

How it works

A team of two or more STTRs will sit together where they have a clear view of the speaker(s). They'll typically wear headphones and will need a high quality audio feed (expect to be asked for an XLR connector) of all the speech they are to transcribe, including questions from the floor.

They will be equipped with their own laptop computers and software, and also their stenographic keyboards. They will produce video output from the laptops, so their text can be projected or distributed to large-screen televisions situated at various points in the auditorium.

The text itself is in large type and scrolls up line-by-line.

Their text follows the speech with a minimal delay.

If you plan to use the transcripts to accompany the published conference videos, mention this beforehand when asking for a quote, because it's not necessarily included and involves additional work.

The STTRs need to work in a team as it involves intense concentrations, and they will usually switch over to each other every 20 minutes or so. They will be working extremely hard all day, so let them have an accurate picture of your day's schedule in advance so they know what to expect.

Your STTRs should also be provided with:

- a list of all speakers' names and talk titles
- a list of the most commonly technical terms you expect speakers to use
- plenty of thank-yous from the podium

Why you need it

Usually speech-to-text reporting is provided for people with hearing impairments, but in fact just about *everyone* benefits from it. Attendees whose first language is not English - a significant proportion of most software conferences, and nearly all of them at an event like a DjangoCon Europe - find it extremely useful. It doesn't just help them catch more of the words or meaning that they might otherwise have missed, it also makes the whole experience at the conference more relaxing, because they know that if their attention falters for a moment they can simply look up at one of the screens and pick up the thread again.

For people who actually have hearing impairments, speech-to-text reporting can be enough to make it worth coming to an event in the first place.

Cost

Speech-to-text reporting at DjangoCon Europe cost us £2850 (£2530 for services at the event, plus £320 for the transcripts) for two STTRs over four days; the service was worth every penny.

How to hire STTRs

Our STTRs were Sheryll Holley and Hilary Maclean, both very highly recommended. They were provided by Action on Hearing Loss (formerly known as the Royal National Institute for the Deaf), but STTRs can also be approached directly.

See the UK Assocation of Verbatim Speech to Text Reporters.

2.4.3 Insurance

Insurance won't protect you against circumstances that are wholly beyond your control. The right circumstances will ruin your event. But, proper insurance cover will at least mean that you and other people don't suffer financially as a result.

Imagine the worst-case scenario: that everyone has turned up in your city ready for your conference, and for whatever reason, there is no conference. Perhaps the venue has burned down overnight, or is closed because of a strike. Perhaps everyone on the committee has fallen too ill to work.

It doesn't have to be anything dramatic: a broken sewer pipe or electrical fault can shut down a building unexpectedly.

If you're obliged to give attendees or sponsors their money back (and some will have paid by credit card, so even if *you* don't feel obliged, some will get their money back whether you like it or not) you could easily find yourself facing bills substantially larger than your annual income - a ruinous sum.

If you're not able to pay everyone back, you could even face legal action by your creditors.

This is what insurance will protect you against.

An example

There are various kinds of insurance for events, and numerous companies that specialise in providing events insurance.

For DjangoCon Europe 2015 Europe 2015, our insurance or six days at our two venues cost us just under £620 and took half an hour to arrange. It was a small price to pay for the peace of mind. It included cover against:

- Cancellation/abandoment of the event: £117'000

  Covered expenses in the event of having to return money for a cancelled event, claims against us in case we failed to vacate the venue in time, and so on. We were protected against bad weather and terrorists, but specifically not against the activity of Icelandic volcanos.

  Our expenses were covered, but *not* loss of net profit (which would have made it qute a bit more expensive), since we weren't relying on making any.

- Property damage at the venue: £30'000

  Covered our property and other people's property, including while being transported. Items such as laptop computers were excluded.

- Public liability: £2'000'000

  General damage or harm for which we could be held liable.

- Employer's liability: £10'000'000

  Obviously we had no employees, but even unpaid volunteers count as employees.

Our cover was provided by Hiscox Events Insurance.

Insurance is not enough

As noted above, insurance might save you financially, but might not be able to save your event. You also need to build backups and redundancy into your plans, from backup *What if your venue becomes unexpectedly unavailable?* to making sure that more than one member of the committee has access to bank accounts and so on.

2.4.4 Accommodation

Important: No accommodation means no conference

You can't have a conference without attendees, and you can't have attendees without accommodation. There will be no conference if your attendees don't have a place to stay.

Most of the people coming to your event will be coming from out-of-town.

Accommodation needs to be within walking distance of the venue, or at least within inexpensive reach using public transport.

> **Warning: The accommodation worst-case scenario**
>
> At DjangoCon Europe 2015, we failed to reserve hotel accommodation in time. We made our plans and our announcements, and meanwhile, a boy band with a huge teenage following announced their own event in Cardiff. We'd just started selling tickets, and discovered to our horror that every hotel bed within a 20km radius of Cardiff had been booked in a matter of hours, save for a few at eye-watering prices.
>
> That's the kind of thing that happens when 140'000 teenagers and their minders descend on a town with a population of 340'000.
>
> We had to reschedule the conference, moving it forward by two days. In the end everything worked out perfectly well, but it was a very difficult couple of days that could have been avoided.

Types of accommodation

Hotels

Don't book rooms for your attendees unless you have to, for example if the whole conference is taking place in a venue and this is part of the contract.

It's enough to identify some suitable local hotels at different price points, and to inform your attendees about them to allow them to make a sensible choice.

However, it's **essential** to reserve sufficient hotel space for your visitors, and to do this **as soon as possible**.

You will need to spend a day or two contacting suitable hotels. Your approach should be along the lines:

> We're running a conference of 350 people, of whom we expect about 330 to be from out-of-town.
>
> We'd like to advertise some suitable hotels for delegates on our website, so that they can book their accommodation when they register.
>
> Your hotel is one of the closest to our venue - can we reserve a number of rooms between the dates such-and-such at a discounted rate for them?
>
> Can you give us a code that the attendees can quote when booking in order to get the special rate?

Hotels are generally happy to agree to this. It's advisable to spread this across a few different hotels.

For each hotel, make a note of the person you're dealing with and their direct phone number or email address.

Be aware that if a boy band concert or other similar mega-event is announced, these guarantees may come under pressure. In this case, you need to reassure the hotels that the attendees will be coming, and urge your attendees to book their accommodation sooner rather than later.

It never hurts to keep the hotels informed of progress (tickets sold), and to make periodic enquiries about how many reservations have been made. Add notes into your *timeline* to remind you when to do this.

Bed and breakfast accommodation

Let your attendees sort this out for themselves.

Using accommodation complexes

As well as hotels and local B&B houses, and depending on the location and season you might also do very well with out-of-season holiday accommodation complexes, or out-of-term student residences. This works very well with events with a strong community atmosphere, and helps strengthen it, especially if people will be sharing rooms or appartments.

This kind of accommodation is typically booked up a long time - well over a year - in advance.

Be warned that you will likely find yourself responsible for allocating rooms to attendees if you go down this route.

Information about accommodation

Give your attendees information about accommodation as soon as possible. You will be asked about it time and again, so have it all in once place on the website.

A map showing your venues and suggested places to stay is helpful.

Some people will be looking for room-mates or house-mates for the duration of the event - help them find a room-mate, for example by providing an email list for attendees.

2.4.5 Sponsorship

Sponsors can be the financial life-blood of a conference. Their support helps you lower the ticket prices and generally offer attendees a better conference experience.

In return, sponsors benefit from exposure, an opportunity to meet and engage with the users of their products and services, and to meet potential new recruits. And also, often they simply want to support the open-source software communities that they are part of.

Sponsorship levels

Typically, a conference will offer a few different levels of sponsorship, so that small and large organisations can find a suitable way in which to contribute.

Below are some suggested levels. These are just suggestions of course - you need to make sure that the levels, however many and whatever they are, are suitable for your event. In this suggested scheme each level is twice the price of the previous one.

You don't need to worry too much about fine-tuning the levels - just make the options clear and reasonable.

Bronze (£500)

- their logo, and a link on the website
- mentions in conference email messages to the community

Silver (£1000)

Similar to Bronze, but includes:

- a stand & banners at the venues
- a quarter-page advertisement in the programme

- a complimentary ticket to the conference

Gold (£2000)

Similar to Silver, but includes:

- a half-page advertisement in the conference programme
- two complimentary tickets to the conference

Platinum (£4000)

Similar to Gold, but includes:

- their banners adjacent to the speakers' stage at the venue
- a full-page advertisement in the conference programme
- four complimentary tickets to the conference

Sponsorship prospectus

A sponsorship prospectus is a standalone document that contains:

- basic information about the event
- some reasons why companies will benefit from sponsoring
- a description of the sponsorship levels
- contact information

Even someone not already familiar with the event or the websites should be able to pick up the prospectus and understand what sponsorship would mean for them. Some photographs of previous events, venues, previous sponsors at their booths and so on will all help.

How to approach sponsors

Some companies have a person or an office dedicated to sponsorship of events - but either way, it's always better to write directly to a named person, preferably one with whom you've already had some contact.

Write describing the event, mentioning the web page listing your sponsorship levels, and including a copy of the *sponsorship prospectus*.

2.5 Communications

2.5.1 Website

In the months leading up to your event, its website is all that exists of it for most people.

Anything you want anyone to know should be on there; you can be certain that if it's not they will be asking you about it by email. In fact, even if it is on the website many people will ask you anyway.

Put yourself in the position of a first-time visitor to your country who barely speaks the language and is a very inexperienced traveller.

If your website doesn't at least guide them towards the information they need, many will not even consider attending.

What to publish when

As soon as possible, the website should contain information about:

- dates
- *Venues*

This will allow people to make their basic plans.

Next most urgent are:

- tickets and pricing
- sponsorship options
- *Accommodation*
- services that some people will rely upon, such as a crèche or *Speech-to-text reporting*

You should also publish your *Code of Conduct*.

These are the things that will allow people to commit themselves to the event.

The next most urgent thing to publish is travel advice.

In due course you will want to publish information about your call for proposals, and later, your programme of talks and other events.

If there are aspects of the conference that are particularly important to you (your *diversity and accessibility* initiatives for example), mention these at appropriate intervals. They may be *important*, but they're less *urgent* than information about venues.

Structure

The more you publish, the more it matters that you organise it in a comprehensible structure. Beware of publishing too much information; just because you want people to know about something doesn't mean that they care or will even read it.

Worse, the more content on the site the more that will *not* be read, and this will sometimes be at the expense of important information.

Responsive design

Especially during the event, more people than usual will be consulting it using mobile devices. Your site needs to have a responsive design so that it's easily readable on a phone.

2.5.2 Programme booklet

Your programme booklet can be anything from a single sheet of paper with some minimal information to a 40-page volume. In fact, you don't even *need* to have one at all, but it is a nice thing to have - useful at the time, a souvenir that people can keep and a record for future events.

How long it is and what gets put in it depends on what you consider its purpose to be, but at any rate, a programme booklet that doesn't give attendees an easy way to find out what's happening when is not worth the effort - so make that a priority.

Contents

Put key information, that people will need to refer to often, towards the front and the back of the booklet.

The two middle pages - if the programme booklet is saddle-stitched, which is most likely the case - are also a good place to put key information, because the booklet will natually fall open at these pages.

Contents can include:

- a description of talks and speakers
- maps
- code of conduct
- sponsor advertisements
- an at-a-glance listing of sessions - this is best placed in a double-page spread across the final page and inside back cover, or across the two middle pages
- contact information
- thank-yous

Printing

If you're not already familiar with your printer's requirements, or indeed with print industry standards, *find out exactly what you need to supply well in advance*, and don't assume you know what it is until you do.

For example. . .

CMYK

Likely most of the images you supply and work with are in RGB colourspace; printers work with CMYK.

RGB images will be a little duller and darker when printed, and there may be some some strange anomalies. Things that might appear identical on screen can look remarkably different in print.

Bleed

Usually printers will want to be provided with files that incorporate a bleed width of around 3mm. The simplest way to do this if you're not using professional-level software for preparing your materials is to use custom page or canvas sizes that incorporate the extra bleed width.

Number of pages

A printed booklet must have a number of pages divisible by four, including its inner and outer covers.

Send a draft version to test the process

You don't want to be dealing with unexpected glitches when you have a print deadline, so send your printers a draft version of the programme booklet two months before the event starts. You'll soon find out whether there are any problems looming, and you'll also discover how helpful and friendly the printers and willing to spend time solving your problems - an equally important thing to know.

Proof-reading

Any mistakes you make will be in print forever. Just saying.

2.5.3 During the event

Note: If you don't find ways to communicate important information to your attendees during the event, you and the other organisers will find yourselves having to repeat it to people over and over again, sucking up vast amounts of your time.

You need to have a plan for communication, which includes people with designated responsibilities (for things like making anouncements or signs) and ways of ensuring that things that need to be announced get to the right person in time and are not forgotten.

It doesn't need to be an elaborate plan, but simple things like making sure that appropriate people have access to the website or Twitter account *and know that they are expected to use them* can help a great deal.

The programme booklet

Your *Programme booklet* should contain most of the information that people will need to refer to during the event - and they should be told that it does; you would be surprised how many people don't even open it.

At registration

It's worth also having a handout that is literally placed into attendees' hands when they register, mentioning things that you want everyone to know, or that you think everyone is likely to ask about, for example:

- *Code of Conduct*
- emergency contact information
- information on how to access the wireless network

You also need to let people know *how* they will be informed over the course of the event of important news updates. If you're going to use a Twitter account for example, they need to know what it is and that you will use it.

You cannot assume that everyone is a user of Twitter or any other platform or service.

Announcements from the stage

Any important announcements *need to be made multiple times*. People won't be in the room, or won't be listening, or won't hear. These announcements should also be backed up in other forms (on the website, via email or a Twitter feed for example).

Communications tools

Communications during the event is generally more critical and time-sensitive than before it, especially if it concerns things like changed venues, different dinner arrangements or the like.

- *if* everybody knows that this is where they should look, the website's ideal for announcements
- Twitter is excellent for messages about the event, but not good for important ones

- email - *if* you are sure you have everyone's email address - is best for important announcements, but keep it for important ones

Either way, it's best not to rely on a single mode of communication for important messages, and the key thing is that people *must* know how to keep up with them.

2.5.4 After the event

Note: After the event, you won't feel like doing much. So, you're strongly advised to prepare as much of the post-conference communications as you can in advance, so you need only to do a minimum of work later.

Feedback

You should ask your attendees for feedback, to find out what the experience was for them. Ask your:

- speakers
- sponsors
- general attendees

questions appropriate to them.

Provide the feedback to next year's organisers

Make sure the feedback is shared with other people who will find it useful. If there'll be an edition of the conference next year, its organisers need to receive it.

Communicate as much and as often as possible. It is almost impossible to do too much communication about your event. Keep sending messages, reminders, advertisements, encouragement, by email, via Twitter and every medium at your disposal.

2.5.5 Inclusive communication

Email and your website are the primary tools for communicating with your attendees. Remember that not everyone uses Facebook or Twitter or other social networks. If you rely exclusively on them you will exclude some of your own attendees.

2.6 Policies

The character of your event will be determined by all the decisions you make for it. Some of these are material decisions - where it's held, when, how long it lasts, how many attendees, its focus - and some are ideological: what values will it embody, what kind of changes it aims to effect in the community it serves.

You will have to adopt and work to your own policies. Just because something is mentioned here doesn't mean that you are obliged to pursue it. Be aware though that the Python and Django communities have certain expectations - don't expect to receive much support for an event that lacks an adequate code of conduct for example.

2.6.1 Code of Conduct

A formal code of conduct, a policy setting out expected standards of behaviour, is de rigeur for Python and Django events, and a formal requirement for events that are funded by the Python or Django Software Foundations.

A code of conduct serves a number of purposes:

- it provides reassurance to atttendees that they will not be subjected to unpleasant treatment by other people
- it reminds people that the way they interact with other people matters
- it helps remove ambiguity about acceptable standards of behaviour
- it makes it easier to deal with any problems that do arise

You don't have to have a code of conduct, but there will be plenty of people who won't attend or won't speak if you don't, and sponsors who won't want to be involved.

Occasionally, people raise questions about the need for a code of conduct, on various grounds (that people should be trusted to behave decently; that it's unnecessary to remind attendees not to harrass others; that it's part of some sort of feminist conspiracy to prevent men from having fun, and more).

These questions tend to be raised by people who have never been harrassed, insulted, abused or otherwise had their enjoyment of a conference spoiled by someone else.

A more serious issue is that a code of conduct is not a guarantee that nothing untoward will happen, and even worse, that it's not a guarantee that the right things will be done if something does happen. All the same, this is not an argument for not having a code of conduct, but for not having a code of conduct that isn't properly communicated or enforced - so make sure that you do both.

See the *example* for a suggested code of conduct text.

Communicating the code of conduct

The code of conduct should be in a prominent place on the *Website* and in the *Programme booklet*. It should also be in a visible place on the registration desk or on poster around the venues, and specifically mentioned to attendees when they arrive.

Needless to say, your *Committee* and *Volunteers* need to know and understand the code of conduct very well, and what they are supposed to do about it.

Code of conduct liaisons

It's recommended that you have a couple of committee members, one male and one female, who will be on-call and available throughout the event. They should each be introduced at the start of the event, and mentioned in the programme booklet and on the website.

Documented procedures

It's useless to have a code of conduct without having properly-documented procedures for its enforcement. They should be written down and communicated to every volunteer.

How to raise a code of conduct issue also needs to be communicated to the general conference audience.

To be completed

- how to enforce it
- things to watch out for

2.6.2 Diversity, inclusion, accessibility

Diversity

A diverse audience at your conference will include a good balance of ages, genders, ethnicities and social backgrounds. People are pretty tired of software conferences where they see nothing but white men who all look and dress the same.

Your event needs, as far as possible, a diverse range of attendees and speakers.

Making inclusion and accessibility a priority will help you attract a more diverse range of attendees.

Inclusion

Inclusion means making a positive effort to ensure that all people feel welcome - not just those who are already confident of their place in the world of Python software. People will feel included by such things as:

- statements welcoming beginners, and beginner-oriented talks or workshops
- provision for special needs: dietary, mobility, etc

Accessibility

Accessibility means making it easy for everyone to attend, for example, by making sure the venue can easily be used by people with mobility problems.

Speech-to-text transcription will help people with hearing problems, as well as those whose are not native speakers of the conference's language.

A crèche or nursery for small children will help parents attend (especially mothers).

2.7 Document templates and examples

These are suggested examples of documents that you might find it useful to adapt.

2.7.1 Code of conduct

[This is a suggested template.]

Preamble

DjangoCon Europe is a community conference. We value the participation of each member of the Django community and want all attendees to have an enjoyable experience. All attendees - delegates, speakers, volunteers, sponsors, exhibitors and organisers - are expected to abide by this Code of Conduct. If necessary, the organisers will act to enforce it.

Code of conduct text

All attendees are expected to show respect and courtesy to others throughout the conference and at all conference events. This includes social and fringe events, whether officially sponsored by DjangoCon Europe or not.

All communication should be appropriate for a general audience, which may include children and people from many different backgrounds. Sexual language and imagery are not welcome.

DjangoCon Europe will not tolerate harassment in any form, or language, imagery or behaviour that are:

- sexist, racist or exclusionary
- intimidating or threatening
- insulting or unpleasant

Harassment can include: offensive verbal comments related to sex or gender, sexual orientation, disability, appearance, body size, race, religion; the use of sexual images; deliberate intimidation, stalking, or following; harassing photography or recording; sustained disruption of talks or other events; inappropriate physical contact, and unwelcome sexual attention.

Should there be a problem

If you are troubled by the behaviour of another attendee at the conference, or are concerned that another attendee may be in distress, please speak immediately to any member of conference staff or contact our code of conduct liaison volunteers.

[Include the name and photo of each of the volunteers here.]

Your concern will be heard in confidence, taken seriously, and dealt with according to a documented procedure.

Conference staff - volunteers and organisers - will be on hand throughout the conference. Any concern, whatever it is, will be immediately passed on to a member of the conference committee. The committee will investigate promptly and if necessary will take appropriate action. This may include:

- asking a violator of the Code of Conduct to leave the event immediately (no refunds will be forthcoming)
- passing on details of the incident to the Django Software Foundation and Python Software Foundation
- informing the police about the incident

We will provide you with a written statement of the outcome, whatever it is.

The purpose of the Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct does not exist because we expect to deal with any such problems.

On the contrary, it exists to help give attendees confidence that they are attending an event where high standards of behaviour are the norm, where everyone is aware of those standards, and that something will be done should it fall short.

By signalling inclusivity and diversity as values we expect the conference to uphold, the Code of Conduct helps guarantee that the event will indeed be inclusive and embrace diversity.

2.7.2 Sponsorship request

[This is a suggested template.]

Dear [name of contact],

Following the success of [your conference] last year, this year's edition will be held in [location] at [venue], from [date] to [date]: [link to your website].

We're seeking sponsors who can provide financial support for the event, which will bring together [number of] [Python|Django] developers from across the world for six days of talks, tutorials and collaboration.

Our sponsorship prospectus is published at [link to your website], and a PDF version is also available at [link to PDF].

Attendees at these events know that they are only possible through the generosity of sponsors, and sponsors rightly earn a great deal of goodwill through their involvement.

At this event, we're also holding a recruitment session on [day], which you're warmly invited to participate in.

Our prospectus lists some suggested levels of sponsorship, but you are most welcome to offer your own proposals if you'd like to suggest some other arrangement. We're working very hard to stage an event that will be esteemed and valued by everyone who is able to attend, and we hope you will decide to be a part of it too.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you'd like to know more. If you prefer you can contact me on [your phone number].

Yours sincerely,

[Your name, your role]